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# A VIRGIN SHALL CONCEIVE

by WALTER MUELLER

**M**R. MUELLER, a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and Rector of St. Luke's Reformed Episcopal Church, Murray Hill, N.J., offers a solution to a controversy which became a matter of live and widespread interest with the appearance of the R.S.V. of Isa. 7: 14 eight years ago.

**W**HEN the Old Testament portion of the Revised Standard Version was published in 1952 a great controversy raged over its alleged infidelity to the Hebrew text and to the conservative interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. Much of the theological furore was concerned with one particular verse of Scripture — the virgin passage in Isaiah 7: 14. The R.S.V. translators chose to use the words "young woman" in their translation of this passage rather than the traditional word "virgin" which is found in the King James Version and the American Standard Version of 1901. It is indicated in a footnote, however, that "virgin" is a possible translation. This footnote notwithstanding, the charge has been made that the R.S.V. translators are guilty of denying the cardinal doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ.

More than eight years have passed since the publication of this portion of the R.S.V. Much of the early controversy has subsided and we are now in a position to evaluate more objectively this new version and its controversial translations. We are at this time particularly interested in Isaiah 7:14.

At the outset it must be admitted that it is quite possible that this new version represents the theologically liberal beliefs of many of its translators, for all translations are, to a certain extent, interpretations. It is also quite possible that many of the translators do not accept the historicity of the virgin birth of Christ. The specific problem with respect to the interpretation of Isaiah 7:14 as it stands in the R.S.V., however, is not concerning the personal beliefs of the translators, but whether or not they have in this case faithfully translated the Hebrew text. Is there justification for using the term "young woman" rather than "virgin," or is "virgin" the only word which here adequately conveys the meaning of the Hebrew?

Old Testament scholars recognize the fact that there are two

words in the Hebrew language which may be translated "virgin"—*'almah* and *bethulah*. According to Gesenius' *Lexicon of the Old Testament*, the word *'almah* means "a young woman of marriageable age" or "a maiden." It is specifically stated that, "The primary idea in this word is not that of unspotted virginity . . . but simply the being of marriageable age . . ." (p. 789, twenty-fourth edition, Robinson translation). The word *bethulah*, on the other hand, means "a virgin pure and unspotted" (*ibid.*, p. 168).

The word employed by Isaiah, who we must not forget was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was *'almah* and not *bethulah*. From a purely literal rendering of the Hebrew word, therefore, the R.S.V. translators were quite correct in using the words "young woman" rather than "virgin."

The basic meaning of a word is only one fact, however, that must be taken into consideration by the faithful translator, for a single word may have different meanings depending upon the nature of the context in which it is found. In some contexts the word *'almah* most certainly means a virgin in the strictest sense of the word rather than merely "young woman." In Genesis 24:16, for example, the word *bethulah* is used with respect to Rebekah: "And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her . . ." In Genesis 24:43, in the same context, Rebekah is referred to as being an *'almah*. In this context, therefore, the words are apparently used interchangeably, with *'almah* meaning virgin in the absolute sense of the word rather than merely young woman. Is this the case, however, in Isaiah 7:14? Does the context indicate that the word is to be translated literally as "young woman," or prophetically as "virgin"?

To answer this question we must first of all ask and answer one other question: "About whom is the prophet speaking?" Or, to state it differently, "Who is the woman mentioned here as an *'almah*, and who is the child she is to bear?"

The New Testament clearly marks this passage as having prophetic significance. According to Matthew 1:21-23 this prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ: "And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."

That this New Testament reference bears witness to the literal

virgin birth of Jesus Christ is without controversy, for the Greek word chosen by Matthew under the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit to translate the Hebrew word '*almah* can mean nothing else. The word used by Matthew was *parthenos*<sup>1</sup>, which always means "virgin" in the strictest and most absolute sense, rather than *neanis* which means "young woman."<sup>2</sup>

There is, therefore, justification for both renderings of the word '*almah* in Isaiah 7:14. On the basis of the meaning of the word itself it can be translated "young woman." On the basis of the New Testament usage of this passage it can be translated "virgin."

If these were the only determining factors we would certainly be forced by the witness of the New Testament to translate the passage in question using the word "virgin". There is, however, one other very important factor which must not be overlooked.

A principle of interpretation which should always be applied to prophecy is the principle of multiple fulfilment, since it is clear from the Scriptures themselves that many prophecies have more than one fulfilment. When a prophecy has a double or multiple fulfilment one is generally immediate and partial, while the other is future and complete. Joel 2:28-38, for example, is a prophecy concerning the last days, which are still future. The complete fulfilment of this prophecy will be accomplished only when the last days have come. A partial fulfilment, however, was accomplished on the day of Pentecost, for Peter in his sermon on that day quoted this prophecy of Joel stating that the occurrences of the day of Pentecost were in fulfilment of ". . . that which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16).

The prophecy of Isaiah 7: 14 had its complete and perfect fulfilment in the miraculous conception and virgin birth of Jesus Christ, but what we must determine is whether or not there was also a partial fulfilment of this prophecy previous to the birth of Christ. If there was, it will of necessity determine the translation of the word '*almah* in Isaiah 7:14.

In the context of Isaiah 7 we find that the birth of the child whose name was to be Immanuel was to be a sign from God to King Ahaz indicating the nearness of the conquest of both the

<sup>1</sup> This word had already been chosen as the rendering of '*almah* in Isa. 7: 14 by the Septuagint version, which is followed in Matt. 1: 23.—ED.

<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that when Aquila, early in the second century A.D., produced a Greek translation of the Old Testament which should turn the edge of the Christian argument from prophecy, he used *neanis* as the rendering of '*almah* in Isa. 7: 14.—ED.

Northern and the Southern kingdoms by the king of Assyria. Since the birth of this child was to be a sign to Ahaz, it is only logical to conclude that the birth took place during the lifetime and reign of Ahaz. This would, therefore, necessitate an immediate, partial fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14.

This view is strengthened by Isaiah 7:16 in which it is stated that “. . . before the child [i.e. the one born to the ‘*almah* of verse 14] shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land that thou [i.e. Ahaz] abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings.”

This characterization of the child whose name was to be called Immanuel is quite significant for it contains a hint as to the time when these events would transpire. It indicates that the conquest of Israel and Judah would take place before the child would be able “. . . to refuse the evil, and choose the good. . . .” That is, this conquest was to take place during the child’s infancy, before he could discern right from wrong.

The immediate and partial fulfilment of this prophecy is found in Isaiah 8 where the prophet states: “And I went in unto the prophetess; and she conceived, and bore a son. Then said the Lord to me, Call his name Mahershalalhashbaz. *For before the child shall have knowledge to cry, My father and My mother the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be taken away before the king of Assyria*” (Isaiah 8: 3, 4 [*italics ours*]).

The latter portion of this quotation has particular significance with respect to the problem at hand because it parallels the prophecy of Isaiah 7:15, 16. Verse 4 states that while Mahershalalhashbaz was in his infancy (“. . . before the child shall have knowledge to cry, My father and My mother. . . .”) the conquest by Assyria would have begun (“. . . the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be taken away before the king of Assyria”).

The primary reference of Isaiah 7:14, therefore, is to the prophetess mentioned in Isaiah 8:3, and her son Mahershalalhashbaz.

Since this prophecy did have an immediate, partial fulfilment, previous to the final, complete fulfilment in Jesus Christ, if it be insisted that the word ‘*almah* be translated and interpreted as “virgin” in the strictest sense of the word, this would mean that there were two virgin births. As anyone can plainly see, such an interpretation would destroy the uniqueness of Christ’s incarnation through the power of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary.

By translating the word ‘*almah* as “young woman” rather than

“virgin” the R.S.V. translators, whether consciously or unconsciously, have avoided the difficulty of being faced with two virgin births. Furthermore, contrary to the accusations of some, this translation does not deny the virgin birth of Christ, for as we have already shown, Matthew in his divinely guided use of this Old Testament prophecy in Matthew 1:23 translated the rather ambiguous Hebrew word *‘almah* with the very specific Greek word *parthenos*, which without controversy means a virgin in the strictest sense of the word.

The Holy Spirit, out of the depths of His eternal wisdom, chose to have Isaiah use a word which meant “young woman,” but which did not rule out entirely the idea of virginity. Thus the one word could be used of both the prophetess and Mary the virgin mother of Christ.

The virgin birth of Christ is unquestionably the subject of this prophecy, but great problems are avoided and our understanding of the Scriptures is greatly enhanced if we accept the R.S.V. translation of Isaiah 7:14, remembering that it had its first and partial fulfilment in Mahershalalhashbaz, and its final and perfect fulfilment in Jesus Christ the virgin-born, divine Son of God.

*Murray Hill, N. J.*